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U.S. Forces Stood Ready to Aid '64 Brazil Coup

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The United States was prepared, if needed, to support militarily the Brazilian armed forces' ouster of the country's last civilian government, according to U.S. official documents recently declassified.

A U.S. naval task force with an aircraft carrier, a helicopter carrier, six destroyers and oil tankers was ordered to take positions off the Brazilian coast during the 1964 coup d'etat against the leftist government of President Joao Goulart, the documents show.

The ships were to await orders from the U.S. ambassador of the time, Lincoln Gordon.

Gordon, who later became Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, denied after the coup that the United States played any role. He denied it again yesterday in a telephone interview.

"It was a contingency never put into effect," he said. "We feared the possibility of a civil war . . . and one side might need some outside help."

As a result, Gordon said, he recommended creation of the logistical force that became known in declassified military cables as "Operation Brother Sam."

The documents show that on March 27, 1964, five days before the culmination of the coup, Gordon cabled Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the probable leader of the military taking power would be Gen. Humberto Castello Branco.

Gordon's military attache was Gen. Vernon Walters, a close friend of Gen. Castello Branco, who became president of Brazil. Walters has acknowledged breakfasting with Castello Branco on the morning after the coup and urging him to assume the presidency.

In the cables now made public, Gordon refers to Walters as being "very well informed." Walters retired

recently as second-in-command of the CIA.

The coup came after the turbulent rule of Goulart. In the March 27 cable to Rusk, Gordon said Goulart was seeking "dictatorial powers, accepting the active participation of the Brazilian Communist Party."

The Brazilian armed forces rallied overwhelmingly behind the coup leaders, and on April 2, Gordon cabled his recommendation that the Johnson administration call off Operation Brother Sam.

The documents were published by the Rio de Janeiro newspaper Jornal do Brasil in its editions of Dec. 18-20. As an accompanying article explained the daily's correspondent was "able to copy a good part of them, at 15 cents each," in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library at the University of Texas in Austin.

John Fawcett, archivist of the LBJ library, said that a 1972 executive order provided for release after 10 years of the late president's papers on request following review by the original classifying agency.

The initial request for declassification was made by Phyllis Parker, a graduate student in Latin American studies at the University of Texas, for a dissertation she has not yet published.

An alert Brazilian editor reading a University of Texas publication noticed that documents about Brazil had been declassified. He sent a reporter to read them.

Brazil's press has been previously under intense censorship. But the censorship has loosened considerably for major daily newspapers considered relatively "safe" by the military government.

Several scholars specializing in Brazilian studies—who are meeting now in Washington in conjunction with the American Historical Association—expressed surprise that the documents showing U.S. intimacy with the 1964 coup at its outset could be published in Brazil.

The Jornal stories emphasized that the documents were made public by the U.S. government. A retired marshal who took part in the coup, the extensive Brazilian followup press coverage as confirming that the U.S. task force was positioned off Brazil.

Figueredo criticized the involvement of the U.S. Navy. It was not clear to what extent the Brazilian armed forces were consulted beforehand by the Americans.

A typical document, originating with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and labeled "top secret," was marked for circulation to the participating U.S. Air Force units and says the nickname Brother Sam "applies only to that part of the Air Force task force activated . . . for total logistical support to Brazil."

Gordon, asked about the origin of the Brother Sam nickname, said he could not recall its use at the time. He discounted speculation that the name referred to President Johnson's brother, Sam Houston Johnson, and suggested it might be a pun on Uncle Sam.

"I don't think President Johnson was really personally involved," said Gordon.

Another Joint Chiefs message directs the commander of the Air Force Military Air Transport Service to appoint "Maj. Gen. George S. Brown mission commander for project Brother Sam." Gen. Brown is now chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The documents released do not make clear how many, if any, combat troops were assigned to the operation. The Air Force was assigned on March 31 to provide six C-135 transports to pick up 110 tons of small arms and ammunition—which the Army was to assemble at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey by the following day—"for onward movement as directed" by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The planes apparently did not head south before cancellation of the operation April 2.

Distribution of these deployment messages included the White House, State Department, several sections of

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